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The Sons of Eli,
The Daughters of Eve

Don't you think it's strange that our tradition makes such a villain out of the character of Eve? There is much that could be said about the Creation story - what the text says, how it's been translated and mistranslated, what our history and tradition makes of it. But I'm sure we're all familiar with the notion that Eve was the real culprit of the fall. She who was vulnerable to temptation, she who deceived her husband. All of these ideas represent interpretations on a text which was left purposefully short of details so that we might play with the mythology. A text meant to expand our imaginations used instead to install rigid ideas reflecting our own cultural assumptions about gender. What a shame. The Book of Genesis does not use gender in that way. If you want to read a book that uses gender to characterize its villains, I'd suggest reading not Genesis, but the book of Samuel. There we find all sorts of stories in which the author uses the qualities typical of gender to comment on its characters. And here we see the exaggerated villainy not of the women but of the men.

Let me introduce you to the "worthless" sons of Eli, the wizened priest of the temple whose only failing is the disappointment of his degenerate offspring. Raised in privilege, afforded every opportunity and resource, and schooled by the best scribes of Israel, the author of Samuel describes them as a generation of priests lost to entitlement and corruption. Here they are portrayed menacing the people who bring sacrifices to offer and seizing the meat from the common cauldron. The practice of the day was to make sacrifices of meat in an act of worship, which would be followed by a festival or feast in which all might partake. But in the great tradition of Russian oligarch or Arabian princes, the Sons of Eli are remembered for taking common property for themselves. The author of Samuel urges us to use our imaginations. In my mind they are red faced pork-bellied goons, forks in hand snorting and belching to scare the common worshippers away. "The practice of the priests toward the people was: when any woman or man sacrificed an offering, the priest's boy came while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand. Then he violently shoved it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot, and all that the fork brought up the priest took for himself." So if we wish to consider how the text uses gender, or if our tradition teaches that the daughters of Eve are all so wicked as the shortcomings of their mother, let us also read of Eli and his selfish, perverted sons. This is the gift of the Women's Lectionary to us, orienting us toward biblical stories that balance our tradition's treatment of gender and expand our imagination for God's activity among us. Reading these stories we are reminded that God is present in the lives of women as well as men. Reading these stories, we can see God's judgment particularly of the excesses of men. "Thus the sin of [Eli's] boys was very great in the sight of the Holy One Of Old; for the men treated the offerings of the Most High with contempt."

Two of my best friends have been expecting children this year. One I've known since college and consider to be like family. Another I've known since divinity school, and though we live in different parts of the country, we've had similar paths forward in ministry and I got to see him several times a year before the pandemic. His son was born on Thursday, and I spent much of the week anxiously awaiting the photos he promised after the delivery. Jackson and I have a godchild in Colorado. Our church celebrated a joyful baptism just a few weeks ago, and we're looking forward to another one scheduled for July 31. All these stories have been on my heart and mind in the past week since the Dobbs decision. I've been thinking about them because none of them have been untouched by the drama of human life. They've all been colored in their own ways by patterns of joy and sadness, hope and worry, wonder and suffering. These stories are not my own to share, and I feel so privileged to have held the bits and pieces that have been shared with me. They've all left me questioning how much I really know and understand the private experiences of families bringing new life into our world.

I've also been thinking about the tremendous resources that surrounded me as I came of age – the sexuality education, the access to healthcare, the communities that understood the needs of adolescents and young adults. Thank God with all these gifts and resources I wasn't completely spoiled like the sons of Eli. Or maybe I was? I know some communities are now beset with argument over the morality of abortion. But that's not where we are as a church. I don't expect anyone here needs to listen to a pastor defend abortion rights. The court's decision is to our church untrue and unjust. It motivates us with misapprehension and anger. Yet my mind keeps wondering not to the polarizing questions central to the politics of abortion but to the stories of those people I love whose lives are impacted by the decision or could still be.

This week I have been wondering what will we do in response to this decision that would have a meaningful impact on our community? What can the church say that would mean more than just words? Maybe there are some things that we can say and do. Maybe those things will come soon or they will come later. But regardless of what we do in the future, it may bear keeping in mind that we are already a community that embraces a way of being with these questions of bearing life that is distinctive to our faith. It begins with how we read scripture and how we worship God. We have organized ourselves in the past year around the Women's Lectionary, a schedule of readings and a new translation of texts for worship, that puts the stories of women and children at the center of our community. It cannot be said that we are doing nothing. The very act of gathering worship in this way is a testimony to where we have seen the love of God come alive.

We are not trying to shape a community where everyone believes the same things about great moral questions. Our intent is to shape a community that listens deeply and speaks with care. We want to form a community where the presence of God is seen in the experience of all people. The stories we read in scripture help us to see God's activity in the lives of women and children reflected in our texts. When we see God's presence in the biblical story, we build a larger imagination for God's activity in our own experiences. What makes me so sad about the Dobbs opinion is not merely that I disagree with it, but that it seems to reflect the privilege of

men who have no imagination for the experiences of women and children. I wish all men could go to church and read from the Women's Lectionary so that the feminine vocabulary would expand our conception of God, so that we could all see the agency and activity of women in the text, so that we might carry with us more empathy and understanding for the experiences of people who are embodied differently, and so that we might all benefit from the wisdom of women whose voices are recorded for the enrichment of our faith. It makes a difference in how we carry our faith whether if we speak only of the fatherhood of Abraham and not the motherhood of Sarah, if David is the only protagonist in the story and Bathsheba is kept offcenter, if we fail to notice how scripture makes a villain out of the men as well as the women.

When we take the Bible seriously what we find is not a sanitary vision of God's presence. We have instead a full and rich portrait of the human condition. We have women and men, people embodied in a multitude of differences; we have heroes and villains; visions of restoration and utterances of judgment. An authentic relationship with God is one that brings all of our people into the light of the Biblical narrative and imagines all of our neighbors in the realm of God's care. The pursuit of this vision of our community is itself an act of protest. To read this lectionary and delight in the stories of these women and children is to resist the prevailing cultural narratives. To put women and children at the center of our worship together is to make our own testimony about the kind of community we wish to be amidst a nation whose laws put women and children at the margins. I believe that anytime we gather in this way we stand together and proclaim that women and all people who carry children are blessed. They are blessed in their hoping, in their waiting. They are blessed in their losses, in their grieving. They are blessed in their choices, in their decision making. We stand in relation to God who bears forth human, and in God's realm we also experience its loss. So there is no way of being in care of women and children that is not blessed. This is our faith and conviction. This is our witness and our testimony to the love of Jesus Christ, proclaimed whenever we gather and whenever we read the story of God's love in scripture. Amen.